Queering the TEF

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Abstract:

Taken at face value, it may initially seem difficult to argue with the sentiments enshrined in the rhetoric that surrounds the TEF – raising the status of teaching in Higher Education, re-balancing its relationship with research, incentivising institutions to focus on the quality of teaching, and making them more accountable for "how well they ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study" (OfS, 2018:1). Clearly, these are laudable aspirations that will chime with anyone who believes in the importance of students experiencing an education that enriches and transforms them and their potential. Drawing on Fraser and Lamble's (2015) use of queer theory in relation to pedagogy, however, this chapter aims to expose the TEF not just "as a landmark initiative that is designed to further embed a neoliberal audit and monitoring culture into Higher Education" (Rudd, 2017: 59) but as a constraining exercise that restrains diversity and limits potential. Although queer theory is more usually linked with gender and sexuality studies, Fraser and Lamble show us that it can be used "in its broader political project of questioning norms, opening desires and creating possibilities" (p.64). In this way, the queer theoretical lens used here helps us to question, disrupt and contest the essentialising hegemonic logics behind the nature and purposes of the TEF, and its effects in HE classrooms. Using the slant-wise position of the homosexual (Foucault, 1996), this queer analysis of the TEF can thus be helpful as a politically generative exercise in opening up space for new possibilities.

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Introduction

Taken at face value, it would seem difficult to argue with the sentiments enshrined in the rhetoric that surrounds the TEF – raising the status of teaching in Higher Education (HE), re-balancing its relationship with research, incentivising institutions to focus on the quality of teaching, and making them more accountable for "how well they ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study" (OfS, 2018:1). Clearly, language such as this speaks to laudable aspirations that will chime with anyone who believes in the importance of students experiencing an education that enriches them and enhances their potential. This impression of educational respectability may not be quite what it seems, however. The aim of this chapter is to peer below this veneer to reveal a rather different perspective on the TEF. To do this, it draws on queer theory to expose the TEF not just "as a landmark initiative that is designed to further embed a neoliberal audit and monitoring culture into Higher Education" (Rudd, 2017: 59) but as a constraining exercise that restrains diversity and limits potential. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of queer theory, before moving on to an examination of the TEF's central features. This is followed by a review of the ways in which the TEF operates to sustain a narrow student identity rather than enable more diverse constructions and possibilities. It then explores the effects of propagating this singular identity before returning to queer theory to consider more optimistic possibilities.

Queer theory?

The decision to use queer theory as a vehicle for critiquing the TEF might initially seem an unusual manoeuvre. This section therefore aims to explore briefly the nature of this academic field in an attempt to examine how it can be used to challenge the TEF's operationalisation and logics. Providing a widely agreed definition of queer theory is far from straightforward, and many scholars have noted the slipperiness of attempts to define the discipline and delineate its parameters (Sullivan 2003, Wadiwel 2009). Though it is more usually linked specifically with studies of gender and sexuality, its central aim is – perhaps surprisingly for some - not to champion what we might describe more broadly as LGBT causes and interests. At its heart, queer theory has a primary interest in favouring diversity by rejecting essentialist framings and fixed identity claims. It is therefore rather suspicious of labels such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc., preferring instead to assert

the fluid, mutable and diverse nature of gender as a part of identity. Sullivan (2003: 43) comments on its aim "to challenge normative knowledge and identities," while Warner (1993: xxvi) sees it as fundamentally linked to "a thorough resistance to regimes of the normal." As such, it is concerned with "pronouncing and enacting counter-hegemonic interventions" (Wilton, 2009:507). The reasons for this are described by Barry Adam (2009:306), an early pioneer of queer studies:

> We are now in a period when difference is the order of the day, and queer orthodoxy denies the search for, or assertion of, commonality now that the commonality posited by gay/lesbian identities has been exposed as never really having existed…

This position means that it has not always found favour with some LGBT scholars (e.g. Halperin 2012:63) who counters that "being gay has been experienced through highly patterned forms of embodied sensibility." Debating these positions is of course beyond the scope and intentions of this chapter, but it is important to establish some clarity on the key tenets of queer theory. Fraser and Lamble (2014/15: 65) usefully identify what they see as its two core elements – firstly, "its ethos of questioning and contesting norms" and secondly, its aim to "disrupt and question normative power relations" in order to highlight non-normative and alternative possibilities. As such, they present a powerful argument for bringing a queer lens to the business and practice of higher education:

> In this invocation, queer is not so much a (sexual) identity as it is a practice or a method for questioning the logic of normalcy (ibid, p.65).

Gunn and McAllister (2013) similarly highlight its fundamental concern to de-normativise hegemonic architecture, while even Foucault (1996) referred to the slant-wise queer position as enabling an alternative way of looking at the world. Drawing on this understanding, then, a queer lens will be used in this chapter, not just in an attempt to question, disrupt and contest what I see as the essentialising hegemonic logics behind the nature and effects of the TEF, but also as a politically generative exercise in opening up space for thinking about possibilities that exceed the established norms.

Scrutinising the TEF

To attempt the above, it is important first of all to examine some of the TEF's key components. Beginning with the rationale for its introduction, its contribution to extending the national conversation about teaching excellence and altering the power dynamic between research and teaching (French and O'Leary, 2017) is clearly of merit. However, these elements arguably take a back seat in the government's own rhetoric which centres more strongly on its aim is "to deliver

value to students and taxpayers" (DBIS 2016, 6). This consumerist framing is reiterated later on in the same government report:

> Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at a lower cost. Higher Education is no exception. (8)

Though some elements have been modified since its introduction, Gibbs (2017) is among many commentators who remain critical of its unaltered rationale, seeing it as fundamentally flawed. He argues that the interpretations of evidence about educational quality, employability and value-for-money which are used to justify its operation are irrational and unsuitable for producing reliable judgements. Shattock (2018:21) is similarly critical of the ways in which the metrics and datasets it uses are merged to form judgements of excellence - "bundled together, this is a statistical mish-mash." Such concerns are in fact much voiced, and Rudd (2017) for one provides an extended analysis of the many and varied critiques of the TEF, echoing many of the chapters in this volume. Much of his critique centres on the TEF's use of data derived from the National Student Survey (NSS) – "essentially an inappropriate customer survey" (p.64).

This particular aspect is important because it serves to embed the notion of the student as consumer firmly at the heart of the TEF's rationale. As Frankham (2017: 633-4) rightly points out, "there has been considerable recent debate on the student as a consumer of higher education and how consumer-like behaviour is more evident as a consequence of changes in policy and practices in UK universities". While the TEF cannot single-handedly be held responsible for this, I would argue that the TEF, with the strong emphasis it places on NSS data based on student satisfaction, plays a large part in cementing such behaviours. Though a concern with satisfaction might seem a benign pre-occupation, it is important to consider that the notion is firmly rooted in a business ontology with potentially harmful consequences. Williams (2013: 99) provides a detailed analysis of this, arguing that:

> 'Student satisfaction' in effect measures nothing more than how students subjectively feel at a particular point in time; their success on the programme to date (in terms of grades); and the extent to which any demands they have made of lecturers have been met.

She goes on to discuss how this focus reinforces the idea that the very purpose of HE is to create satisfied consumers, and that this understanding, as it embeds itself in institutional thinking and practices, begins to have maladaptive consequences for pedagogy:

> The demand to produce satisfied consumers potentially has an impact upon pedagogy, as it may lead some lecturers to avoid making intellectual demands of their students and provide 'entertainment rather than education.'…Lecturers seeking promotion and security are incentivised to make students satisfied through flattery and appeasement. (p.100)

As French and O'Leary (2017) identify, one issue here is the fundamental flaw in equating satisfaction with learning. Though there is some connection between the two – and whatever this relationship, it is a very complex, shifting and fluid one – effective and deep learning is often unsettling and challenging, and thus potentially unlikely to be rated by some as 'satisfactory.' But more than this, entrenching this understanding at the heart of HE serves to perpetuate a mono-optical construction of the student as consumer, thereby reducing alternative framings as it normalises and embeds a hegemonic homo-economicus identity. It is precisely such essentialising processes that queer theory can help us to expose, contest and disrupt - processes that are tantamount to a relentless (hetero-) normativity in the TEF's privileging of consumerist machismo which will now be cross-examined.

The TEF – cementing consumerist machismo

As discussed above, the instrumentality enshrined in the TEF logic of prioritising students' evaluations of satisfaction helps to "construct education as a transaction and students as consumers" (Frankham, 2017: 635). In a sense, it could be argued the TEF reflects what Dahler-Larsen (2012: 75) describes as contemporary society's obsession with evaluation and its emphasis on user satisfaction "legitimised by consumerism in society." In such a climate, "it is difficult to be against evaluation" (ibid: 3) and universities, as 'public' organisations, "mostly do what is in accordance with the cultural environment in which they operate" (ibid: 93). The TEF's fetishisation of satisfaction, and the way this influences institutional behaviour, policy and practice, is only one of four key elements that in my view entrench a narrow, consumerist hegemony. The second feature is the highly visible way in which it operates to reduce the diversity of learning, experience, relationships and purpose behind HE study to a simple gold/silver/bronze quality stamp. This manifests a desire to frame and constrain universities as consumer commodities that can be compared and labelled as easily as cars, holidays or washing powders. As Shattock (2018: 22) puts it:

> The selection of Gold, Silver and Bronze awards can only be described as crude, populist, and pandering to media exploitation.

From a queer perspective, this parading of colours could be read as a flamboyantly visual attempt to flaunt the TEF's consumerist mission, in a way that is conspicuously out, loud and proud. As well as

fulfilling its function as a consumer branding system, the third element concerns how it simultaneously operates as a mechanism that fetishizes and fosters competition as an organising principle for institutions and students. Institutions are incentivised to aim for gold so that they may not only attract a larger share of better qualified students in the competitive market place, but also so that they will be in a position to boost income further by raising tuition fees in line with inflation, as only the higher-branded institutions will be allowed to do (Ashwin, 2017). Students too are incentivised to take advantage of this information as a basis for making consumer choices about where best to study and which institutions will allow them to maximise their chances of gaining the 'best degree' and subsequently, the 'best employment' options. As such, the logic of the TEF encourages students once again to foreground their economic motives (Bartram, 2016), thereby framing the purpose of HE study firmly within a neoliberal logic of macho, competitive, economic self-interest. A queer lens would once again contest this 'biggest and best' macho-normative framing in order to release rival motives, desires and aspirations from the closet.

The TEF's totalising logic is arguably also promoted by a fourth element - its emphasis on employability within the metrics it utilises, drawing on student employment data post-graduation, and as currently under consideration, incorporating "actual graduate salaries after five years to be acquired from the tax authorities" (Shattock, 2018: 22). Frankham (2017:632) describes how this growing focus on employability "has also changed the general environment of higher education. Universities increasingly have dedicated staff, responsible entirely for employability initiatives, for liaising with employers, for carrying out 'skills audits' at the point of graduation and gathering statistics on graduate destinations." Barkas, Scott, Poppit and Smith (2017: 7) argue that even though the whole notion of employability is contested and nebulous, it has become enmeshed in a normalising discourse around HE, as Frankham (2017) demonstrates:

> a discourse is created that appears to be normal…; with continued use, an unquestioning *acceptance* becomes embodied in the language, a process that Bernstein (2000) termed 'normalisation of genericism.'

Williams (2013:89) echoes similar sentiments, highlighting the special part employability plays in the competition fetish and arguing that "this relentless promotion of employability is due to a need for institutions to appear attractive to new students by demonstrating the employment success of previous cohorts." It is not my intention here to argue there is no link between degree study and employment, or that securing a job post-graduation is an unimportant consideration – but as we see in Barkas et al.'s argument – and indeed, through a queer lens - this relentless discourse contributes to the normalisation of a narrow set of expectations and understandings of the university and its

purposes, and as such, becomes part of an armoury that privileges a normative fixation with macho metrics, while 'othering' and subordinating alternative ways of thinking, acting and desiring in the contemporary academy.

'TEFfects' of the macho monolith

The above section makes the case for the role the TEF plays in cementing the monolithic neo-liberal framework within which UK HE is firmly constructed, based on what I see as four key elements. A queer analysis would suggest that together, these features combine to create and normalise an essentialist student-consumer identity. Such an assertion naturally invites discussion of why this could be considered problematic – the focus of the next section.

To begin with, its fetishisation of satisfaction may have a number of consequences that do little to support the 'traditional' aims of HE, let alone some of the aspects the TEF was intended to achieve. Williams (2013) above suggests how the prioritisation of satisfaction may ultimately reduce the quality and challenge of education, for example, by encouraging some lecturers to diminish the overall student experience. She illustrates how this reductive risk operates:

> The notion of being responsive to student choice reinforces the suggestion that lecturers exist to provide a satisfactory service to students rather than an experience that is intellectually challenging, complex and potentially transformative (p.99).

Frankham (2017:635) supports this view, explaining that "course material that is challenging, and assignments which present students with a challenge are clear foci for student expressions of dissatisfaction and concern […] this may be diminishing the intellectual challenge of a university degree and the benefits that such a challenge may bring." As I have argued elsewhere (see Bartram, 2016) such nurturing of satisfaction can further encourage a degree of passivity among students, as they become conditioned to see HE as a form of service provision, and themselves as entitled consumers. Such passivity is strongly at odds with the need for active and independent engagement that constitutes effective learning at university level. That said, the same consumer mind-set has been implicated in a rather more active orientation when it comes to students investing increasing energies in standing up for their entitlements to satisfactory service, particularly when perceived in relation to such 'products' as grades and classifications - Garner (2009) has noted, for example, how dissatisfaction with assessment and degree outcomes has seen a strong increase in student complaints at UK universities. More broadly, Frankham also discusses how the need noted by staff in her research to cultivate student contentment has engendered a stronger degree of student dependence on staff – "students are becoming less independent, perhaps less capable of initiative,

perhaps less capable of thinking for themselves, over time" (636). A participant in Bartram's (2018:276) study echoes the very same sentiment:

> … the increase in tuition fees has led not only to consumer practices amongst students but an over eager approach from the university to recruit and retain students, regardless of conduct or working quality. There has been a notable increase in student support services coupled with altered grading criteria whereby students are by large spoon fed information. The culture has increased students' dependence rather than independence.

If we go along with this interpretation, then, it could be argued that the TEF – ironically - is doing little to support universities in their attempts to develop graduate orientations that enhance student employability. In the same study, Bartram (2018:276) also notes how increased institutional courting of student satisfaction via such mechanisms as the NSS and TEF appeared to be "central elements in encouraging emotional bargaining," whereby some students exhibit an increasing tendency to make strategic use of their emotions in exchange for a range of academic concessions and improved outcomes.

Alongside such arguably reductive effects on students, Williams (2013) also points out what she sees as a negative influence of the employability agenda that the TEF promotes on university courses themselves. She argues forcefully that the fixation with employment has led to teaching staff being encouraged to present the vocational importance of what they teach to students above academic merits, and cites examples of a philosophy degree at Exeter University incorporating a 'Humanities in the Workplace' module (2013:89), seeing such a development in strongly critical terms:

> If studying an academic subject cannot be justified because it makes an essential contribution to our collective understanding of what it means to be human and the nature of the society we live in, it must instead justify its existence in the more mundane sphere of employability.

It is again beyond the scope of this chapter to debate the relative merits of such developments, though the above example arguably illustrates the narrowing impact of the neoliberal university vision. Heaney and Mackenzie (2017), who see the TEF very much as a mechanism of control, expose two further reductive effects. Not only is it likely to reduce the breadth of the pedagogical diet students experience – "under perpetual pedagogical control, pedagogical exploration becomes totally subordinated to the production of satisfied and employable customers" (p.13) - but it may ultimately end up reducing the range of university degree courses available to students, thereby

ironically reducing consumer choice, as universities become inclined to remove courses perceived to be associated with lower levels of satisfaction or post-graduation employment. And even more worryingly perhaps, Furedi (2017) argues the most significant effect of such mechanisms as the NSS and TEF is the way in which they operate to diminish capacity. He suggests that the culture of courting satisfaction which they engender, and the various forms of "institutional flattery" (p.140) which naturally follow, ultimately infantilise students and reduce their capacity for dealing with challenge and ambiguity.

From these combined 'TEFfects,' the picture of students that emerges is – arguably - an unflattering one: diminished and passive, inclined to massage by metrics, seduced by dataset desires and employment promise, addicted to easy and narrow satisfactions. Viewed through a queer lens, these effects might be seen as the inevitable outcomes of a crushing and stifling (hetero-) normative ontology that fixates on and fetishizes consumerist logics at the expense of other ways of being, thinking and wanting.

Moving forward with a queer eye

So far, then, I have argued that the TEF operates to normalise a macho consumerist identity, consistent with the neo-liberal philosophy of "closing off alternative approaches" (Saunders, 2015:403). It does this by locating HE firmly within a masculinist business ontology, whereby institutions, lecturers and students are systematically conditioned into compliance with a consumerist vision of universities that redefines how we come to see their purpose, the ways in which we judge their worth, and indeed how we behave and engage. Rudd (2017:73) explains how once such a vision has become embedded:

> A powerful new 'doxa' (Bourdieu 1984) may arise that will result in compliance to the new wider discourse and newly constructed 'realities', both through conscious resignation, and more efficiently, through unconscious compliance. This may be precisely the moment we are at with regard to the Higher Education and Research Act, and particularly the TEF.

A queer analysis would concur that the TEF has helped to perpetuate and privilege this consumer doxa, and that cross-examining its essentialising assumptions and reductive effects in order to de-normativise its hegemonic control is part of queer theory's raison d'être. As Warner (1993: xxvi) suggested above, queer theory aims above all to resist "regimes of the normal," and this chapter has hopefully demonstrated that the TEF has very quickly become part of 'the HE normal,' in the process closing down, eclipsing and othering what might be described as non-normative student constructions and ways of being and wanting. Queer theory is therefore of service in helping to

formulate a counter-stance against the TEF's narrowly singular, neo-liberal hegemony – but can it go beyond this position? In other words, how can we use it not simply to expose its macho consumerist logic, but, as Wilton (2009) suggests, to find constructive ways of undermining its philosophy and effects?

To this end, queer theory can help us to reflect on alternative orientations and possibilities, given its concern with diversity and contesting the very notion of normalcy – and with recognising, liberating, including and nurturing alternative desires, motives and ways of being. In this sense, queer theory can usefully remind tutors of their importance in allowing, exploring and encouraging other student motives and identities. Though this is admittedly no simple task, staff should grasp opportunities that allow them to address what Hull (2002:19) sees as the key challenge teachers face:

> The teaching problem is not one of developing students' reasoning powers […] Rather, the teacher's problem is to help awaken desire at its deepest level. The solution involves developing students' capacity for openness and receptivity to their own and to one another's hearts, minds and passions.

This challenge is unlikely to be supported by a TEF-driven system that fetishizes user satisfaction and competition. Fraser and Lamble (2015:64) emphasise how queer theory can be enlisted not just to question, but as "a method of dreaming, naming and being otherwise in the world." Quoting Munoz (2009:1), they show us how a queer view can help educators contemplate approaches to teaching and learning that genuinely challenge and open:

> Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present…. We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing…. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

It is my contention that the TEF is a part of this 'quagmire of the present', suffocating better pleasures, discriminating against alternative desires and closeting potentiality. Clearly, queer theory's contribution to disrupting the logics of the TEF will not lie in establishing a prescriptive set of simple measures or strategies, but in adopting a stance that encourages educators to reflect on how they engage in practices with students that enable, broaden and transform, rather than reproduce and comply with dominant educational scripts and political orthodoxy. As Fraser and

Lamble (2015:68) quite rightly point out, adopting such a stance "does not require us to identify as queer or to be experts in queer theory. It simply asks that we be open to practices that foster space for different types of desires to flourish." They do, however, suggest that a practice they describe as 'queering conversation' can be a useful strategy for enacting this vision. For them, queer conversation is based on three key attributes (2015:68-9):

- a continual questioning and disruption of the conventional binary between teacher and student;
- the disruption of norms around the boundaries of what can and cannot be said in the classroom;
- the capacity to make space for new potentialities and possibilities.

Queering the TEF would therefore involve teachers in a careful and constant mission (and mind-set) that seeks to allow students to bring non-utilitarian desires out of the closet and experiment with different ways of enjoying university; to queer the service provider/user binary; to remind students of the life-long humanistic 'gains' that being at university can offer – the friendships; the social benefits and pleasures; the personal enrichment; the transformative power of shifting horizons; the joys and challenges of new ways of thinking and sharing; the development of rich interior resources; in short, the need to nurture a dynamic diversity of satisfactions, pleasures and motives. In some senses, these ideas chime with Wood's (2017) discussion of 'emergent pedagogies' and fostering approaches that could be adopted to subvert the TEF. The challenges involved here in the context of the neo-liberalized university landscape are not insignificant – as discussed, HE policy in general, and the TEF in particular, position students primarily as consumers, conditioned to internalise an individualised, economically-focused, competitive macho-subjectivity. Resisting the weight of these collective neo-liberal influences is no mean feat, and some may suggest that the queer challenge mounted in this chapter will do little to disrupt the stranglehold which the TEF maintains. In this respect, Fraser and Lamble (2015:74) sound a note of optimism:

> For us these strategies are about making small changes in order to open spaces for bigger ones; they are about doing transformative politics at the micro-relational level in order to question and rethink power at the structural or systemic level. […] Despite their ephemeral quality, they can shift a course, alter a student's engagement, and bring about the generative spark that ignites the potentialities students bring to the classroom.

Queering the TEF by adopting approaches that repeatedly engage students in expansive ways of thinking and desiring, then, could not only serve to enhance the mission of the university as a

'public' good that genuinely enriches us all; it may help to expose and undermine the worst effects of the TEF, and – to finish with a filmic flourish, if I may - to begin to move UK HE from the stark machismo of Quentin Tarantino to the gentler sensibilities of Quentin Crisp.

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